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FRAUD ALERT

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GET IN TOUCH:

Write:

Public Integrity Unit
Division of Inspector General
Fraud Hotline
510 Bay Avenue
Clearwater, FL 33756

Call:

(727) 45FRAUD
(727) 453-7283

Fax:

(727) 464-8386

E-mail:

fraudhotline@mypinellasclerk.org

Internet:

www.mypinellasclerk.org
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HURRICANE IRMA BRINGS OUT THE CROOKS

Before Hurricane Irma, crooks preyed on the vulnerable with phone and email scams. They would often pose as utility company employees while trying to extort payments. They would claim that they were attempting to collect an overdue bill and threaten to turn off your electricity within an hour if you did not make an immediate payment to them. The crooks would often request that you give them debit card or bank account information to complete the transaction. Only later did the victims learn that their accounts were wiped out.¹

Tips to Spot this Scam:

- Prepaid debit cards and wire transfers are a red flag. If a caller specifically asks you to pay with a prepaid debit card or wire transfer, this is a huge warning sign. Your utility company will accept a check or credit card.
- If you feel pressured for immediate payment or personal information, hang up the phone and call the customer service number on your utility bill. This will ensure you are speaking to a real representative.

As Hurricane Irma was bearing down on Florida, crooks saw an opportunity to steal. The crooks played out their schemes while the high winds kept law enforcement off the streets and unable to respond to calls until the winds subsided. SECO Energy, Florida Power & Light (FPL), and Tampa Electric (TECO) reported that during the hurricane, criminals posed as utility workers, knocked on doors, and robbed residents at gun point.^{2 & 3}

Another scheme used by these crooks posing as utility workers was to conduct inspections of people's homes prior to the restoration of electricity. Cocoa Police reported that two "utility workers" gained access to an 89 year-old woman's house. One worker walked through the house with the woman checking her light switches. The other rifled through the woman's house while the woman was distracted. The police reported that the two crooks stole \$13,000 in jewelry from the victim.⁴

Tips to Spot this Scam:

- Utility workers will have ID badges from the utility company. If you are still not sure of the authenticity of the worker's identification, you can always call the company to verify the worker's identification.
- Utility vehicles will have the company's logo and lettering on the side of their vehicles.
- Utility workers will never ask to come in your home to complete work.

the IG **FRAUD ALERT**

After Hurricane Irma had passed and residents began to have their power restored, a new scam began to circulate. The new scam informs Duke Energy customers by text message that if they received a bill that was higher than normal, Duke Energy was going to reduce or waive their bill. The scam provided detailed instructions for the customer on how to claim the reduction. Duke Energy issued a statement that they do not have programs to reduce or waive bills related to Hurricane Irma.⁵

Tips to Spot this Scam:

- Look at the source of the information. Did it come directly from the utility company?
- Visit the company's website or call their customer service number to verify that the program exists and how to qualify.

Sources:

1. <https://www.bbb.org/utilityscam/>
2. <https://www.secoenergy.com/thieves-posing-as-utility-workers-rob-residents-during-hurricane/>
3. <https://patch.com/florida/brandon/teco-reports-scam-artists-operating-during-irma>
4. <http://www.snopes.com/2017/09/12/florida-police-warn-of-post-irma-scams/>
5. <http://www.wtsp.com/news/local/verify/will-duke-energy-cover-your-electric-bill/476544911>



For more information or to file a complaint, contact Pinellas County Consumer Protection at (727) 464-6200 or visit www.pinellascounty.org/consumer.